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## The Consumer is not Necessarily a Citizen

(Vartotojas nebūtinai esti pilietis)

**Santrauka.** Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamos socialinės pilietinės visuomenės formavimosi sąlygos, svarstomi požiūriai į dabartinę ekonominių idėjų kaitą, aptariami prieštarašavimai, kurie kyla dėl to, kad netinkamai su-  
plakami vartotojo ir piliečio terminai. Daugiau dėmesio skiriama kolektyvinės praktikos sampratai.

Pilietinė visuomenė esti socialinio solidarumo pagrindas. Nors šis požiūris nėra naujas, čia pabrėžiama, kad pilietinė visuomenė svarbi priimant įstatymus bei kitas normas, kurios siekia išvengti susvetimėjimo, kad pilietiš-  
kumo samprata apima kur kas daugiau negu tik organizacijas, egzistuojančias už pagrindinių visuomenės insti-  
tucijų. Pilietinė visuomenė nėra savaime suprantamas dalykas. Tai nėra tik profsąjungos, vietiniai klubai ir nefor-  
malios organizacijos. Daug svarbiau yra tai, kaip šios organizacijos, kurios išreiškia darnią diskutuojančių ir  
polemizuojančių piliečių veiklą, susijusios su kolektyvine praktika.

Per pastaruosius dvidešimt metų, silpnėjant Johno Maynardo Keyneso idėjų poveikiui, susiformavo naujas –  
neoliberalus – požiūris į ekonomiką. Vienas pagrindinių Keyneso principų yra tas, kad prekyba ir kiti mainų būdai  
yra socialinė veikla. Visi yra tos pačios sistemos dalis, taigi visoms socialinėms klasėms (tiek darbininkų klasei,  
tiek elitui) būdingas bendras likimas. Vadinas, siekiant bendrojo gėrio, turi būti laikomasi kooperacijos principų.  
Kadangi subalansavimo galimybė esti gana trapi, būtinos darnios pastangos.

Tačiau nuo 9-ojo dešimtmečio pradžios šios koncepcijos pamažu atsisakoma, o tarpusavio priklausomybės  
idėja suprantama kaip ekonominės raidos ir asmeninės laisvės suvaržymas. Keyneso idėjas keičia Friedricho von  
Hayeko koncepcija, teigianti, kad kolektyvinis pradas yra mitas, o socialinė tvarka formuojasi spontaniškai  
rinkos sąveikų aplikose. Hayeko požiūriu, kolektyvinė atsakomybė yra ne tik beprasmis dalykas, bet ir esminis  
ekonomikos stabdis. Neoliberalizmo plitimas daro nebemadingą socialinės sutarties sampratą, nes, Hayeko  
požiūriu, santykiai tarp individų yra prekiniai ir trumpalaikiai. Atsisakoma minties (kaip pasenusios ideologijos),  
kad žmonės yra esmingai tarp savęs susiję ir turi bendrus interesus. Tuo tarpu Keyneso koncepcinis vaizdinys –  
visiškai kitoks. Svarbiausias dalykas tas, kad asmenys vaizduojami kaip piliečiai, kurie susiję su kaimynais ir  
platesne visuomene. Kaip tik todėl tikimasi, kad jie laikysis teisingumo ir nešališkumo idealų. Šioji koncepcija  
nėra abstrakti, ji reikalauja nuolatinio budrumo ir noro veikti, kai tik šito prireikia.

Šiandieną šie požiūriai yra nesuderinami. Problema ta, kad asmenys, kurie yra socializuoti kaip vartotojai,  
raginami gana sparčiai tapti piliečiais. Hayeko požiūriu, individai tampa piliečiais tik dalyvaudami rinkoje. O Keyne-  
so teigimu, toks pilietinio įsitraukimo būdas yra nepakankamas, jis negali sukurti lanksčios ir demokratinės visuo-  
menės. Veiksmingam pilietiškamui reikia gerokai platesnio požiūrio ir aktyvesnio socialinio dalyvavimo negu tik  
rinkos nauda grindžiamos taisyklės. Stigant aktyvios socialinės sutarties, pilietinė veikla yra labai apribojama.

Rinka yra klaidinanti – pilietinio lavinimo ir švietimo požiūriu – metafora, kuri vaizduoja pernelyg atsijusius,  
atomizuotus ir abejingus individus. Rinkos reguliuojama visuomenė sudaryta iš besivaržančių ir priešiško asme-  
nų, o socialinė sritis apibūdinama kaip darinys, susidedantis iš „kliūčių“, kurias turį įveikti sėkmės siekiantys  
individai. Sakykim, socialiniai įsipareigojimai tariamai riboja individų gebėjimą greitai ir veiksmingai prisitaikyti  
prie rinkos pokyčių.

Tačiau galima plėtoti ir kitas metaforas. Juk netinka sakyti, kad visuomenė esti tik netiesiogiai – geriausių  
atveju – susiję atomai. Naujieji modeliai atsižvelgia į tiesioginę sąveiką tarp visuomenės dalių. Be to, jie neįtraukia

„aukštesnės tvarkos“ principų, kurie vadinami nematoma rinkos ranka, koordinuojančia savarankiškų elementų veiksmus. Šie modeliai rodo, kad socialinės tvarkos principai yra intersubjektyvūs – socialiai konstruojami ir diskursyviai plėtojami.

Kadangi socialinė aplinka nėra laisvai pasirenkama ir išorinė (kaip, sakykim, rinkos – nematomos rankos atveju), svarbu tai, kaip asmenys įvertina savo veiksmų poveikį kitiems asmenims. Jie turi įsipareigojimą išsaugoti socialinės asociacijos integralumą, vadinasi, negali nepaisyti kitų asmenų egzistavimo būdų. Išsaugoti tokį bendravimo stilių – tolygu tartis ir diskutuoti dar prieš imantis veiksmo.

Pilietinė visuomenė, priešingai negu abstrakti rinkos erdvė, sudaro įsipareigojančią sritį, kurią išsaugo kolektyvinis, intersubjektyvus veiksmas. Todėl ne rinka, bet pilietinis diskursas yra ekonominės sąveikos pagrindas. Sugrįžimas į šią sritį yra teisėtas ir gali atnaujinti gyvenamąjį pasaulį. Vadinasi, pilietinė visuomenė yra galimybė išvengti susvetimėjimo, kurį diegia rinka. Kadangi rinka ir pilietinė visuomenės griežtai atskiriamos, intersubjektyvi ekonominio reguliavimo kilmė yra iš esmės deformuojama. Pilietiškumas negali būti efemeriškas dalykas. Kai pilietį pakeičia vartotojas, demokratija susiduria su rimtomis problemomis, nes be abipusio pasitikėjimo, saugumo ir kolektyvinės atsakomybės visuomenė pasmerkta iširti į daugybę atomų, kurie vieni kitus kaltina, įtarinėja ir kurie yra nesaugūs. Taigi pakartotinai verta kelti esminį sociologijos klausimą: kaip ir kodėl egzistuoja visuomenė?

## Introduction

During the past twenty years life has changed dramatically in the United States and the rest of the world. The focus of this paper is the shift that has taken place with respect to a particular set of ideas. A new image of the economy has gained popularity, which has had enormous social implications. Stated simply, the philosophy of Keynes is in decline, while neo-liberalism has become the centerpiece of most discussions about the economic life.

One of the principle assumptions of Keynes' work is that trade and other modes of exchange are social activities (Keynes 1997). In order for the economy to retain a sense of equilibrium, systematic and regular interventions are needed. The implied message is that all social classes share a common fate, and that commodious relationships must be maintained between the working class and elites. Everyone is basically part of the same system, and thus cooperation is necessary to insure the survival of the common good. Persons depend on one another for the smooth delivery of goods and services, and, as Keynes suggests, this balance is quite fragile and can be maintained only through a concerted effort.

At the beginning of the 1980's, however, this imagery was cast aside. The Keynesian theme of interdependency was presumed to stifle economic growth and personal freedom. To counteract the influence of Keynes, the work of Hayek was introduced and widely disseminated. Central to Hayek's perspective on the economy is that the collective is a myth, and that order emerges spontaneously through the myriad of transactions that occur at the marketplace (Hayek 1944).

For Hayek, collective responsibility is not only meaningless, but a serious drag on the economy. Policies that are designed to correct social imbalances, in other words, thwart competition, distort the market's signals, and generate widespread inefficiency. As a result, the generation of wealth slows and everyone suffers, especially the entrepreneurs who are presumed to be the primary source of economic stimulation.

As part of the general acceptance of neo-liberalism, the social contract is presumed to be passé. Consistent with Hayek's position, relationships between persons are simply monetary and fleeting. Associations are optional and

forged mostly to facilitate specific projects; these alliances are predicated on convenience and momentary needs. The idea that persons are essentially bound together and share interests is dismissed as an outmoded ideology. Within the intellectual context supplied by Hayek, persons owe nothing to one another, except perhaps the right to be left alone.

What has emerged from this new economic framework is a rendition of the person that differs greatly from the version assumed by Keynes. According to Hayek's economic worldview, persons are primarily customers or consumers. Their needs are met at the marketplace, and thus they should always comport themselves as traders. After all, traders are rational, efficient, and unaffected by issues that reduce their ability to compete. Traders are not swayed by proposals or arguments that are idealistic and lack immediate utility. Indeed, a pragmatic attitude is at the core of successful trading.

With Keynes, however, the imagery is different. Most important at this juncture is that persons are portrayed as citizens. They are essentially linked to their neighbors and the wider society, and therefore are expected to promote ideals such as justice and fairness. Every citizen is obliged to express concern for the welfare of others, and strive to eliminate any obstacles that might impede their development. This imperative is not abstract, but requires continued vigilance on the part of persons and a willingness to act or intervene when necessary.

Clearly these two models of the person are incompatible. The problem nowadays is that persons who have been socialized to be consumers are suddenly asked to behave as citizens. Nonetheless, according to Hayek, individuals become citizens only by participating in the market. But from a Keynesian viewpoint, this sort of civic involvement is insufficient to create an inclusive and democratic society. Effective citizen-

ship requires a much broader vision and more extensive social participation than is considered to be wise or profitable at the market.

In the absence of an extensive social contract, civic activity is very limited. Market relationships are based on what Erich Fromm calls negative freedom—persons do not meddle in the affairs of others (Fromm 1958; 119–141). In fact, any talk of intervention is equated with becoming a nuisance. But if fundamental to democracy is the promotion and protection of social diversity—ranging from political opinions to lifestyles—consumerism will not necessarily lead to this ideal. Only a strong commitment to a social contract will support this end.

### **The Rise of the Market and Civic Duty**

Various Latin American writers have been arguing for quite some time that most contemporary societies are governed by the “Total Market” (Serrano Caldera 1995; 16–7). In addition to the emphasis that is placed on the market as the most appropriate regulatory mechanism, a particular body of values has inundated the entire globe. As a result, a unique and restrictive worldview appears to be all-encompassing and represents the epitome of rationality and fairness. Similar to the insights revealed by Marcuse in *One-dimensional Man*, the consumer is extolled as fundamentally rational, even handed, and fair, and thus becomes the paragon of success (Marcuse 1964). Anyone who deviates from this role, accordingly, deserves to be ineffective and marginalized.

The centerpiece of this conception of the person is a specific understanding of individualism. In terms of this model, the person is alone, motivated almost exclusively by personal concerns, and ultimately free. In short, persons are atoms who pursue their own “preferences”, as both classical and neo-liberal economists say, and through the efforts of the market are united, at least momentarily (Assmann 1997; 89–90).

In an almost magical way, personal greed and ambition is translated into the common good. At times even Adam Smith was skeptical of this transformation, and thus he argued that important moral principles must be instilled in all traders to avoid anarchy (Smith 1976). Nonetheless, neo-liberals abhor this sort of interference in the market. They believe that human nature is sufficient to guarantee that chaos will not erupt; exhibiting too much greed is simply assumed to be a threat to everyone and something to be tempered. This type of self-control is rational and supports the claim that the market enables all informed and disciplined traders to prosper.

As should be noted, success at the market does not require that persons consult one another regularly. In fact, intentional collaboration is indicative of the manipulation that distorts the market. In this respect, alliances are ephemeral because they are merely correctives that are needed temporarily to reestablish equilibrium at the marketplace. Under normal conditions, traders are adversaries who are embroiled in a zero-sum game, and thus they view one another as impediments to their own self-expression and advancement. And because the freedom of each individual is unencumbered, others are nothing more than barriers that must be overcome on the path to success.

Where does civic participation fit into this scenario? The answer to this question is quite simple: the common good is addressed only *indirectly* through the pursuit of personal gain. The assumption is that individual success is synonymous with social improvement; the common good is advanced as a natural by-product of personal triumphs. But what about the possibility of a few powerful persons reaping huge benefits, while the remainder of society is impoverished? Adding these gains and losses together may create a positive outcome, although a large portion of society may experience down-

ward mobility. Although these examples could be multiplied, collective action is supposed to be avoided at all cost.

Social improvement is simply not the result of collaboration. Emotion, not reason, is exercised collectively. Hence wealth is not a social product that can be created or distributed effectively through welfare or other interventionist policies. Rather, wealth is personal property that individuals should be allowed to invest as they see fit. Huge individual gains, for example, must be encouraged to “trickle down” to those who have not been so successful. According to this *laissez-faire* scheme, the social impact of trading is an afterthought. No-one has the right to demand that personal aspirations be molded or altered to foster the good of society.

As this conceptual framework is applied to other facets of society, problems are not difficult to envision. Viewing themselves to be consumers, persons treat one another as competitors. Additionally, they are suspicious of one another's motives and see no benefit in collaboration. And as they continue to confront this hostile world, strategies that relate to self-protection become very important. Withdrawal from society increases, and civic responsibility becomes merely a platitude. Genuine solidarity is lost, while persons engage in hollow rituals in an attempt to recapture a collective spirit. They long for camaraderie that is touted to be anathema to their individual needs. As Marx described this process, persons are alienated completely from their “species-being” or general sense of humanity (Marx 1973; 111–5).

### Consumer as Citizen—A Dangerous Mix

Consumers are not necessarily problematic to the polity as long as they remain on the periphery of the political process. If persons are confined, for example, to listening to commercials and periodically casting individual ballots, this model is sufficient. Clearly these are

not collective activities and are indicative of passive or “low intensity” democracy (Serrano Caldera 1995). Social atoms are fully capable of absorbing input, processing these data, and making decisions based on a predetermined list of options. But if more intense participation is required or solicited to make a polity functional, problems can easily begin to escalate.

In view of the September 11 attacks, many Americans feel insecure and vulnerable. They desire to recapture a sense of solidarity and community. In other words, they want to become citizens and live in a supportive and protective polity. Consistent with the views of Locke, they want the state to defend and provide them with a tranquil environment, so that their everyday routines can return to normal. Perhaps even more important is that government officials are imploring them to become more vigilant and involved in their neighborhoods. The claim is that through this participation they will be able to detect threats and prevent other attacks or similar disasters.

But these persons have not been trained as citizens, and thus do not have the skills required to create actively a commodious polity. At this time, for example, most persons do not know their neighbors or their neighborhoods. They have not been involved directly in neighborhoods associations, and thus have not engaged in serious discussions or debates, or any other significant exchange of ideas, with their neighbors. Consequently, these persons do not have much insight into the behavioral patterns exhibited by others in their community. Taking control of this environment, therefore, is not thought to be possible. The focus of any citizen is thus likely to be self-protection and increasing personal security – through more police surveillance or the purchase of guns, locks, or other devices—that only promote isolation. A type of siege mentality, in other words, can be inadvertently spawned.

Because persons are atoms, a neighborhood is basically a threatening place. Unknown individuals are encountered who are pursuing private aims. Given this situation, something abnormal becomes easily synonymous with anything different. In the absence of solidarity, vigilance amounts to little more than voyeurism. Persons view others from distance and make decisions about their demeanor from afar, without an accurate basis for this sort of evaluation. Superficial traits, as might be expected, become the criteria for making determinations about deviance or threats. Anything that is different becomes a warning signal.

What neighbors need are trustworthy criteria for making accurate interpretations of behavioral change. They must distinguish clearly difference from what is truly out of the ordinary. This analysis demands that persons grasp the values, beliefs, and commitments that sustain and guide their neighbor's actions. These elements unveil, in more sociological terms, the life-world (*lebenswelt*) of a community (Husserl 1954). Accordingly, these mores provide the key to understanding precisely various behaviors and any changes in their patterns. Having knowledge of this normative base supplies the context that is essential for judging accurately a person's intentions.

But consumers eschew such intervention, and simply orient themselves in terms of rules that are accepted as valid for everyone. To be specific, the market projects empirical signals that any rational or normal human being should be able to recognize.

Nonetheless, the norms that govern a neighborhood are not this obtrusive or obvious. They are embedded within a biography that has been modified in many ways, and reflects a plethora of histories, cultures, and futures. At the confluence of these factors is where mutual understanding is forged. At the nexus of language games, as Lyotard writes, is where a com-



munity exists (Lyotard 1984). A consumer, in short, is reluctant to consult others in the manner necessary to appreciate these sources of norms. At the marketplace, for example, cultural diversity is not a legitimate explanation for failure, but an excuse for a lack of discipline or preparation.

As consumers, persons have no real responsibility for the larger environment, such as their neighborhoods. Suggesting that they should enter into this domain in order to avert threats or violence will likely only create additional anxiety for the citizenry. Because persons do not really know one another everyone becomes an object of suspicion, thus promoting a heightened sense of peril and insecurity. And as they become aware of what they do not know, persons can easily be overwhelmed by the ensuing ambiguity. Increased withdrawal from this source of threat is likely to follow.

### **Citizenship and New Social Imagery**

The market is the wrong metaphor to describe the generation and education of citizens. Persons are too disconnected and unresponsive to one another according to this imagery. When regulated by the market, a society is comprised of competitors and balkanized; the social realm is imagined to be filled with obstacles that successful persons learn to avoid. Extensive social commitments, for example, limit the ability of persons to adjust quickly and efficiently to changes in the market. Profitable investment strategies cannot be encumbered in this way.

Other metaphors are available, however, that convey a different image of social existence. The systase, rhizome, and quilt are different in two important respects from the market (Murphy 1989). First, the components of the whole, or in this case society, are not thought to be atoms that are, at best, indirectly related. And second, according to these new models,

order emerges only through direct contact between the parts. In none of these alternatives is a higher-order principle, such as an “invisible-hand”, introduced to coordinate the actions of independent elements. In a more social sense, there is no room in these images for self-absorbed agents who are oblivious to their surroundings.

Take the quilt as an example. A quilt consists of numerous patches that are sutured together at their edges. The whole, therefore, reflects the contrasts that are revealed through the parts. The general idea is that the parts are not isolated and unrestricted, but are bound together in a productive or mutually beneficial manner. In fact, the significance of each part depends on the surrounding patches; each patch has integrity only within the overall pattern.

The quilt announces a vision of society that is more consistent with citizenship than the market. Especially noteworthy is that the social contract is not optional—persons are illustrated to act always in the presence of others. Like the patches of a quilt, individuals are joined at their peripheries. Their actions, as phenomenologists argue, are co-constituted, and thus individual behavior is never devoid of social implications. Order, in other words, is fundamentally intersubjective and is inaugurated and maintained through on-going discourse between persons (Levinas 1987).

Effective individual action, therefore, requires that persons consult one another regularly, since they are basically linked together. Because this arrangement is not irrelevant, optional, or an afterthought, as at the market, persons have a responsibility to appreciate how their actions affect others. They have the obligation to preserve the integrity of this association, and therefore must not disregard or violate the existence of others. Mutual consultation before acting is basic to the preservation of this style of community.

As is suggested by the quilt, others are not abstractions who are merely part of a cost-benefit analysis that is conducted before acting. They are not a means to be manipulated, used, tricked, or dismissed. Each person as a member of the quilt has integrity, meaning, a purpose, and legitimacy that must be protected in any plan of action. Stated differently, every person represents an Other – a truly unique Other – that must not be ignored or distorted in any way. In the end, any insensitivity to others would destroy the equilibrium or harmony present in a quilt.

The quilt suggests a new morality that is consistent with the demands of citizenship. Different from the market, persons are encouraged to engage, consult, and cooperate with one another. The common good is everyone's primary concern, rather than the interests of a few idealists or dreamers. Within this framework, self-concern goes hand in hand with concern for others; interest in the other is no longer presumed to lessen the prospects for personal happiness. Happiness is not associated any more with a mythical sense of unencumbered freedom.

A key part of this new morality is that persons are expected to intervene when the integrity of others is jeopardized. Again opposed to the marketplace, intervention is not an aberration or destructive. Intervention is a duty of all citizens when someone in their community is attacked or discriminated against in some manner. Indeed, interpersonal commitment such as this is essential to maintaining a brotherhood of persons. Promoting the welfare of others is an aspect of citizenship that no-one can abdicate without serious social consequences.

### Civil Society and Solidarity

Civil society is beginning to receive some attention as a possible base of social solidarity. This focus, of course, is not altogether new. Writers as different as Rousseau and Hegel have

believed that civil society has an important role in establishing laws and other norms that are not intrusive and alienating. Whereas traditional institutions such as markets are abstract, bureaucratic, and insensitive to daily affairs, neighborhood organizations are not. In more current parlance, popular organizations emerge from below and embody the will of all denizens.

As should be noted, the term civil society in this context does not refer to organizations that simply exist outside of traditional or mainstream institutions. Civil society, in other words, is not discovered necessarily in labor unions, consumer groups, or local clubs. Each of these examples can be reified and restrictive as any governmental agency. What is unique about current discussions of civil or popular organizations is that these groups are thought to reflect collective *praxis* (Sartre 1979; 505–24). Rather than predetermined, these associations gain their purpose and character from citizens acting in concert. And in line with the new social imagery, these groups arise from below through discourse, debates, and other modes of direct consultation that are endemic to civil society.

Contrary to the abstract space of the marketplace, civil society constitutes an embedded realm that is supported by collective, intersubjective action. Through this exercise of collective will, institutions are given their form and, if necessary, changed. But in terms of the market, these unofficial organizations represent the underside of society. They exemplify the irrational forces that must be socialized and gradually disciplined to fit into the market.

From the perspective of civil society, however, the market is an abstraction. Critics such as Hinkelammert argue that the market is nothing but a social construction, which prescribes a particular way that persons should define themselves and their relationships to others (Hinkelammert 1995; 238–9). The market, in other words, is a product of civil society that has drifted

away from this foundation and appears to be autonomous. Hinkelammert's point is that civil discourse, and not the market, is the base of economic interaction, and that a return to this realm is warranted and can rejuvenate social life.

Civil society is thus a remedy for the alienation that has been spawned by the market. Because the market has been differentiated categorically from civil society, the intersubjective origin of this economic regulator has been seriously distorted. Hence returning organizations to their base in civil society can have a very positive impact on the development of citizens. For example, when order is established on this foundation, persons have intimate knowledge of one another, build their relationships on interpersonally validated trust, and generate solidarity through their regular intervention into public space. As a result, associations that are grounded in civil society provide persons with a terrific sense of security.

Constant engagement that encourages persons to defend one another is essential to the creation and preservation of an open and free society. This intervention is a virtue, rather than a nuisance. Consumers are crippled in this respect, and thus are incapable of achieving any security. There are no lasting relationships at the marketplace, but instead tenuous friendships that may have to be sacrificed at any moment to the demands of the so-called bottom line.

Citizenship, on the other hand, cannot be this ephemeral. Therefore, democracy is in serious trouble in modern societies, if the citizen is replaced by the consumer. For without trust, mutual defense, and collective responsibility, a society is condemned to devolve into a morass of accusations, suspicions, and insecurities. No one will assume that there is any benefit to engaging others in a long-term, collective project. Why, therefore, should society exist at all?

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